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Editing an Anthology: Editing, Publishing & Blogging

By

Jessica R. Allgaier

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing

In the Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

2010

College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Jessica R. Allgaier

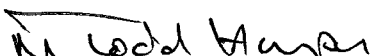
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in the Department of English

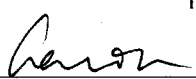

At the (month and year) graduation

May 2010

Capstone committee:



Member

Member

Practicum: Rhetorical Analysis
By Jessica Allgaier

I. Abstract

The Oxford American Magazine

When I first graduated college, fresh-eyed and eager to join the flock of working writers, I snagged an editorial assistantship at *The Oxford American Magazine*, billed “The Southern Magazine of Good Writing.” The magazine, launched in the early nineties by founding editor Marc Smirnoff and then-publisher John Grisham, is most notably famous for its annual music issue, annual “Best of the South” issue, and other themed-issues dedicated to the likes of “After the Storm” Katrina, Food, Film Noir, Architecture, and the Southern Woman. It’s kitschy, it’s modern, and its eye for art is down right impressive.

When Smirnoff dropped out of high school and planned to drive a beat-up Volkswagen cross-country from San Francisco to the east coast, he stopped in the artist-booming town of Oxford, Mississippi. Visioning a magazine that featured the *real* south, Smirnoff planted his feet on the square and never left until *The Oxford American* was transplanted to Arkansas in 2001.

Among the ranks of writers and columnists are Barry Hannah, Hal Crowther, Carson McCullers, Charles Portis, Rick Bragg, Tony Early, William Gay, Steve Martin, Van Dyke Parks, Tom Piazza, Allan Gurganus, Ray McKinnon, Roy Blount, and Jack Pendarvis. Referencing the 2008 release of *The OA’s* music anthology, Dolly Parton said, “God Bless America and God Bless *The Oxford American Book of Great Music Writing*.”

The Oxford American: synonymous with the—deep-fried, slow drawl, swimming hole, segregationally-challenged, Zora Neale Hurston, Andalusia, Rowan Oak—South.

The Project

When I left the magazine to move to Atlanta, I enrolled in Kennesaw State University's Master of Arts program in Professional Writing. The M.A. in Professional Writing appealed to my practical side—the part of my right brain that said an M.F.A would leave me in the same head scratching career position as my B.A. in Creative Writing. Professional Writing, however, would ground me in a sustainable application of the craft.

My amicable parting with *The OA* left me in a position to pick up side projects, and that's what Smirnoff offered when he asked me to be Lead Editor for their latest anthology, *The Oxford American Book of Great Nonfiction Writing*.

My role as Lead Editor consisted of reading over 200 creative nonfiction articles previously published in the literary magazine, grading each like a school teacher using a scale of A to C, proposing an amount of articles to publish in the book, selecting articles to include, drafting a budget, creating letters and contracts for the authors, typing the pieces in MS Word, and editing and compiling the manuscript in accordance with the University of Arkansas Press manuscript guidelines.

Using the project to fulfill the Practicum portion of my Capstone, I offered to complete the proposed activities pro-bono, on the one condition that my deadlines

were adhered to, or changes to the production schedule fell within reason. In addition to compiling the manuscript, I proposed to my Capstone committee that I maintain a blog on my process, and compose a Rhetorical Analysis that delves in the process and evaluation of my project.

II. Editing an Anthology

Before a manuscript can be perfected—before it can be copy edited for stylistic guidelines, 12 point font, one inch margins, block quotes, all caps, italics, bold, em dashes, double spacing, and correct spelling; before it can be edited for content, grammar, and voice; before the articles can be grouped into departmental chapters; before pieces take a grueling amount of time to type in MS Word (thanks to the magazine’s crashed hard drive and nonexistent archiving); before authors can sign contracts and be persuaded into absurdly low fee payment—articles must be read, graded, and selected.

One of the biggest psychological deterrents that came into play while reading, grading, and selecting articles, was *How can a mere graduate student tell Timothy Colin Woodward that his piece is not interesting enough to be anthologized? How could the writing Gods mistakenly let me—a little-published student—choose which venerable author to anthologize and which to kick to the curb?* But as one of my committee professors pointed out, at least I’m not a 21-year-old policy intern in D.C. running the country. I’m only an editor.

But since the writing Gods have looked favorably upon me and put me in a position to judge, I accepted the responsibility willingly. Each article received a

grade based solely on the writing—the imagery, the language, the uniqueness of content. After all two hundred articles were read and graded, I lumped them into their respective categories: A+, A & A-, B+ & B, B- & C. Every article that received an A+ had a guaranteed spot in the book. I immediately cast aside those in the last category (B- & C), and evaluated the remaining middle categories based on my comments, the subject, and the author. Some authors had several pieces in the A to B range, and since I decided not to feature multiple pieces by a single author, I selected the best of their work. I also made sure no two articles selected featured the exact same subject, however, many of the articles fell into natural categories, easily defined as chapters. An overwhelming number of “After the Storm” pieces made the final cut, so they are grouped into a chapter titled “New Orleans.”

Selecting pieces with varying content didn’t prove difficult, with a pool of articles to pull from as diverse as a homage to okra to reinstating Uncle Remus as a literary genius. I read pieces on ex-lovers, sinfully delightful meals, mermaid-themed water parks, and child pageants. On growing up with Faulkner, being engaged to a movie star, the South’s best motels, the foreclosure crises of McMansions, psychotic chess-playing whiz-kids, and my personal favorite: calf-pulling.

With diverse subjects come diverse styles. There are close, introspective writings that paint almost spiritual images of lost Southern towns, comical odes that eulogize aphrodisiac gulf fish, and solid journalistic reporting that raise awareness of HIV in rural Alabama. And that’s what an anthology of *great* creative nonfiction

should do—showcase the best humorous, serious, imaginative, soulful, lamenting, introspective, honest work readers dare lay eyes on.

I hope that's what I've accomplished; choosing 35 of *The Oxford American's* previously published articles (not to mention a great comic strip chronicling a hardened book festival attendee) to highlight the most entertaining, solidly written works of the quarter century. With this goal, I also attempted to maintain objectivity, and held an ethical approach to reviewing the pool of possibilities.

The fame or relationship of the author to *The OA* had a small, but notable influence on what pieces were anthologized. Hal Crowther, for example, has his own department in each quarterly issue. Charles Portis is a beloved Little Rock native and friend of the magazine's. Roy Blount's been writing "Gone Off Up North" since before I was born (not literally). Including a heavy hitter like Rick Bragg could help sell the book. As could William Gay, a southern literary fixture. Although these names circled my marketing & relational radar, to be perfectly honest, their work is the best of the best, and their solid writing is probably what landed them a spot on my favorites list in the first place.

I experienced a few disappointments when I crafted the final table of contents, though, like when I realized *The OA's* own editors didn't make the cut. Or when I had to throw out some excellent pieces by Marianne Gingher, Steve Yarbrough, Mathew Teague, and Barry Hannah because *The OA* had published them in a lesser-known anthology back in 2001.

Overall, I stayed true to the most objective frame-of-mind I could muster. I explored my thoughts on grading objectivity in this November 3, 2009 blog post titled “Reading Creative Nonfiction:”

Sweatpants and my purple-framed glasses have become a semi-permanent fixture to my wardrobe during the past three weeks as I sit in my studio, reading article after article, trying to select the best pieces for *The Oxford American's* anthology of creative nonfiction. I grade each piece on a scale from A to C, like a teacher determining which student has produced the *greatest* work. I can't be bias when it comes to picking Larry Brown's captivating account of pulling calves over Barry Hannah's reflection on why he writes, just because I—a writer—would rather my imagination be swept away to a cattle farm in Mississippi than introspect on what possesses me to put pen to paper, fingers to keys. I can't even show bias in selecting from an author's own mini-anthology of *OA* pieces like Roy Blount's column, *Gone Off Up North*. Which do I like better? Hell if I know. But I figure it out. (I gave Blount's piece on regional writers an A and his article on Southern humor an A-.)

Some works, though, leave me breathless. I have to walk away from my desk after I'm finished reading them because I know nothing can compare to how brilliantly the language weaves its way under my thick editorial skin, and the pieces to follow will surely drown in its shadow. Creative nonfiction has a tendency to stir something inside me. With ready-made plots and interesting characters worth reflection, each writer has all of the ingredients to fry up a juicy story, but good creative nonfiction is a matter of good perspective. Throw all the ingredients in the pan at different times, with different flavors, and you'll get a different dish. Great writers, like good chefs, care about timing, perspective, garnishes.

Take Matthew Teague, for example, in “The Chess King of Decatur Street.” He paints

a captivating portrait of New Orleans chess legend Jude Acers, lovable and eccentric all in the same sentence. Acers, penned by a less experienced writer—or one less convicted that this character in all of his eccentricities is still worth loving—could fall short without the stream-of-conscious dialogue Teague introduces in the ripest of moments.

I must dress smart head to toe, toe to head. Boots on my feet, beret on my head. The beret is red. Red in traffic means stop, so people walk past my boards and stop to play. And red is just a beautiful color.

I don't love chess. I don't love cattle. I'm not particularly interested in a Southerner gone off up north. But when a writer makes me love the oddities of a man who lives and breathes chess on the streets of New Orleans, when I catch myself tearing up at the loss of a stillborn calf in the middle of a Mississippi freeze, when being a displaced Southerner shows me a little bit about who I am, I can't shake those words. They stick to my bones for a long, long time and I find I like chess because I like Jude Acers, or cattle farming because I learned a thing or two from Larry Brown.

I'm about halfway through the reading portion of compiling the anthology. Then author contracts, formatting, and editing the manuscript will occupy my time. For now, though, I plan to revel in the craft of creative nonfiction, the weaving of words, timing, perspective, and garnishes.

Observing these garnishes—the sensitivity to which authors craft their stories—was hands down the most fruitful morsel I took away from this project. Exploring what I've learned and dissecting where I learned it brings me to section three, Writing on Writing.

III. Writing on Writing

Ironically, one of the most laborious, grueling tasks during the compiling and editing of *The Oxford American Book of Great Nonfiction Writing* was the most beneficial to my own writing. Typing the articles took up a large percent of my time and was often painfully slow, but was focused so minutely on how each word is woven into a sentence and how each sentence works together to create imagery, plot, and character development that the process enabled me to climb inside the author's head and scrutinize their style, tone, and voice, among other signature ways they weave their story.

I've often heard that the best way to explore the writing styles of revered authors is to attempt writing like them. In order to mimic a writing style, it's necessary to conduct a careful reading, observe how the author strings words together, and scrutinize their foreshadowing and timing. Throughout my coursework in the MAPW program, I've dabbled in this form of miming by writing with the hip dialogue of John Green, young adult author of *Looking for Alaska* and *An Abundance of Katherines*, in Fiction for Young Adults; commanding the process-oriented voice of Donald Murray in *Teaching Writing in High School and College*; and the down-with-grammar! attitude of John Truscott in *Teaching Writing to Speakers of Other Languages*. In each of these style-exploration exercises, however, I only studied one aspect of the writer's craft.

But when typing the articles—prepping them for the final round of edits—every piece had to be carefully reassembled, like how a carpenter handcrafts each appendage of a bookshelf, even if he's been producing the same design for years.

Breaking down construction was at first difficult, having to switch between author's styles—and often mis-predicting the next word as my fingers flew along the keys. But eventually, such close narration of the text on the keyboard let the patterns of the words sink in. For example, Charles Portis in “Motel Life, Lower Reaches” inverts his sentence structure from the typical way I pattern speech. Though both correct, his subject/verb/noun arrangement is penned in a dialogue akin to the way my Grandmother talks about the weather, the bone china, the going-ons of her children. I'd like blame our differences on regional speech patterns, but maybe their way of stringing subjects, verbs, qualifiers, and prepositions is a throw back to an era of letter writing in cursive, of strict grammarians, and when reading was the population's main form of entertainment. Regardless, expanding the way I think about speech makes me a more versatile writer—it's like collecting new vocabulary words, only it relates more to *when* you use the word, not necessarily the meaning of the phrase itself.

Although I once received a list of writing “dos and don'ts” (actually, I've received a lot of those compilations, like “the most improperly used words in the English language” from both Teaching Writing in High School and College and in Teaching Writing to Speakers of Other Languages), seeing the “Do” in action helps affirm the technique. Rule number six on my list of Creative Writing Dos and Don'ts is “Do not simply state a color. Do describe it.” What's more lackluster than reading about a hat described as the color brown? Carson McCullers exemplifies how including a descriptive word aids in painting a more vivid image in her piece, “Forever a First Draft,” when she describes a hat the color of toast.

Pulled from my observations while typing and editing the pieces anthologized in *The Oxford American Book of Great Nonfiction Writing*, I've assembled my own list of "Dos" with a slightly different slant: 12 Rules About Good Writing (& Writers).

Here it goes.

Rule 1) When an author wants to include beautiful imagery about something that does not yet exist, he breathes it into existence by prefacing his verbal painting with three short words: *I imagine that*.

Billy Ray's farm does not yet exist on an earthly plane. It is a vision of his imagination so far, and I have no idea of the form it will ultimately take in real life, but I imagine that it is a place where tall trees grow and the deep green rolling pastures are dotted with flowers. Fat sleek calves frisk on the sunny hills and draw sustenance from between the massive hind legs of their mothers, their bags laden with rich milk as they calmly chew their cuds while the calves nurse and butt. There are clear streams flowing, and the cattle drink in the shade, their elegant necks stretched to the cold water where small fish swim and bullfrogs trumpet in the evenings.... Each cow will have an acre of grass and the grass will be regularly fertilized and mowed so that everything is neat and orderly. The mud will be kept to a minimum. Billy Ray will work hard and his farm will make a living for him, and he will be happy, and his life will be fulfilled, and he will know great peace in his soul such as few men have ever known. God will smile down upon him, and his efforts, and the farm will hum like a well-oiled machine. There will be dogs, and life will be good.

—From *Billy Ray's Farm*, by Larry Brown

Rule 2) Good writers pull quotations from other writers to illustrate their point—
journalists, novelists, poets, and rappers.

Lil Wayne on safe sex: “Better wear a latex, cause you don’t want that late text, that
‘I think I’m late’ text.”
—From *I Will Forever Remain Faithful*, by David Ramsey

Rule 3) Good writers gravitate toward loss and disaster.

I fetishize disaster. I live in the best city in the world and all I can write about is
hurricanes and dropouts.
—From *I Will Forever Remain Faithful*, by David Ramsey

Rule 4) Good writers can make a metaphor out of anything and the reader will
always find it so deeply true and applicable to them self.

For so long, I have held that yellow house inside me. I have been at times shaken
when it came to letting people near me because it would mean letting them near the
unadulterated one, the *real* yellow house. I was a kid raised well (with class and
hope but little money) and who grew up in a raggedy house. I never did need to be
one or the other. I mean, who does not know that they are more than just a single
adjective? But back then when I was eight, twelve, fifteen, I had no idea about the
stupefying nature of dichotomy.

Or that, if one is able, one might, one day, return to stand facing everything
you originally left looking for.

—From *A Yellow House in New Orleans*, by Sarah M. Broom

Rule 5) Even if the piece is not about the writer, she will, without fail, want to introduce it with an anecdote from her own childhood, or at least include a childhood anecdote somewhere in the work.

When I was seven, I became engaged through an accident of kindness to Sergio Z. Sergio was a boy from Spain with a woefully unaccomplished kickball record, short bangs, and a Castilian accent that we all mistook for a lisp. (That pretty much described me at the time, too, except that my bangs flopped into my eyes and my lisp was domestic.) His letter to me read:

You will marry me? Circle one: Yes/No.

I panicked. We were supposed to be doing some *very important work*, looping endless rows of *g*'s in Ms. Spitale's cursive sweatshop or tracing a map of Peru. We were certainly not supposed to be making and accepting marriage proposals. To protect Sergio's feelings, and my own vision of myself as a not-unkind person, I wrote a *maybe* in the margins. My *maybe* was a craven mark, tiny, faint, in pencil lead, easy to erase or deny. My reward for this was social death.

—From *Building for Love*, by Karen Russell

Rule 6) All good writers are worried that the future of language will evolve into “brittle speech turds,” perpetuated with questions like *Sup?* and names like *EZ Mart*.

My students are shocked to be expected to read or produce more than a sound bite. Hundreds of them have claimed to be unable to generate three pages on any subject, yet you could not convince them that there are deficiencies in their world of surfaces. They rely on pictographs, like cavemen, and the conversations I overhear in the hallway are ceremonies of largely nonverbal calls and responses: “S’Weedend?” “Uhhn.” “Guh?” “Hrrn.” “Tch.” Since we already supposedly think and compose in spatial correlation to the eight-by-eleven sheet of paper, or the size of our computer screens, I fear the effect of such tiny gadgetry as handheld

communication devices. Will sentences become brittle speech-turds? “Beer?”

“Tonight?” “Shoes nice.” “Help no.” “Good yes.”

—From *All We Read is Freaks*, by William Bowers

Rule 7) All good writers have a love affair with their city.

But I have learned that the longer you live in New Orleans, the more unfit you become to live anywhere else. It is my home, my mistress, and my muse. And nothing on Mapquest.com is going to change that.

If I had to leave New Orleans, I wouldn’t have a clue which way to go. And I’m pretty sure once I hit the state line, I would be lost. Geographically, emotionally, spiritually—I would have no point of reference.

Because I haven’t even the faintest idea which way is west.

—From *No Direction Known*, by Chris Rose

Rule 8) Good writers confess something about themselves—something awkward, uncomfortable, or dangerous. The reader will be more interested, feels closer to the author, and undoubtedly identifies with the confession.

I was fascinated by my father as a sexual creature.... What did a grown man’s penis look like? What size, color, what shape and configuration, what additions or corrections had been made.... There was no reason for this fascination except that I had so little experience with men at all. I knew no men really, and the one I did know was so shy and careful of his modesty that I had never in all my life seen him without his clothes on. I hungered for information, for imagery. I needed control groups, comparison studies. I wanted some confirmation of myself as a male creature. I suppose that’s what I wanted. I would have gladly studied the nakedness of any person on earth who would allow it, so starved was I for whatever it was the world was hiding from me.

—From *Welcome to Itta Bena, Little Lady!*, by Lewis Nordan

Rule 9) Every good writer should be able to write an ode describing a happy, light-hearted experience that does not involve loss, disaster, or illegal activity. In a generation where celebrity gossip and shock-factor nonfiction sweep the bestseller lists, a real writer—a good one, that is—can also write about blissful moments like water skiing on the “unchurned pockets of... Judas Priest Lake...”

You're going to do this until you get up and stay up. You will ski longer than anyone else who skis today. You'll slice back and forth across the wake. You will stay up, lifting on the rope handle high above your head as you are out wide in glassy pockets, your body a thin angle away from the surface. Clutch the handle close as you tighten, defiant, to squat over choppy spots. Inevitably, you grow weak, and a hump of water catches you. Then you are really down, slammed face-first into the lake. For a few seconds, everything is black. Your ski is far-flung again. Hell. Let Dad pick it up. When you climb back in the boat, the fatigue is delicious, the kind that only results from hard play. Your legs are jelly, warming against the sunbaked seats, your towel damp around your shoulders. Check your tan line.

—From *Ode to Skiing*, by Susannah Felts

Rule 10) Every good writer goes chasing after ghosts. It doesn't matter if they believe in them. They rationalize their existence, then deny it, but ultimately, they look for the spiritual things that haunt their past, and if they haven't uncovered their own ghosts, they'll go hunting for others'.

When I was a kid I read an issue of *Life Magazine* about the seven greatest American ghost stories, and that was the first time I heard of the Bell Witch. Later my uncle, who was a great storyteller and had read the early books, fleshed out the tale. I

found the books and read them myself, and for my money it's the quintessential ghost story. I figured that someday I'd go to Robertson County and see the Bell farm, which seemed to me an almost mythic place existing only in its own strange fairy-tale geography.

It was years before I made my first visit, more years still before I made my second.

—From *Queen of the Haunted Dell*, by William Gay. (Also see rule #5)

Also:

I go to Louisiana at the end of the summer to look for ghosts with my wife. We drive down out of Tennessee, and down through Mississippi. We stop at the Wal-Mart in Hammond and buy a flashlight. The interstate dives out over Lake Pontchartrain toward New Orleans on the back of the world's longest bridge. In the middle of the Causeway, Sarah says, "I'm not sure I believe in ghosts." She is a student at an Episcopal seminary. "I don't know why God would need them."

We have just passed a dead water moccasin. I wonder how and why it got up onto the bridge. I say, "Maybe ghosts don't have anything to do with God."

—From *Ghosts in the Midst*, by Tony Early

Rule 11) A good writer bends the rules so bad, it's like grammar never existed in the first place. Case in point: Mark Richard's Memoir entirely in third person present progressive.

Ya'll should do something with that child, people say. The mother takes the child to Cub Scouts. For the talent show the mother makes a wig out of brown yarn and the special child memorizes John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech. They laugh at the child in the wig at the show until he begins his speech. Afterward there's a lecture on drinking water from the back of the toilet after an atom bomb lands on your town, and everybody practices crawling under tables. For weeks afterward people stop

the child and ask him to do the Kennedy thing until finally somebody shoots Kennedy in Texas and the child doesn't have to perform at beer parties and on the sidewalk in front of the grocery store anymore.

—From *Who is That Man Tied to the Mast?*, by Mark Richards

Rule 12) A good writer is able to uncover the world's darkest tragedies, whether a hostile war zone in Zaire or an AIDS epidemic in rural Alabama.

Now those memories seem dreamlike or unreal. DeShazo's AIDS work has opened a window for him to come onto a black rural world rarely seen by whites—one that he never imagined existed. At fifty, he likens it to the experience of having a pair of blinders torn from his face. He's found clearings in the woods filled with rows of rusting trailers where people can't afford electricity, water, or indoor plumbing—places that would be described as shantytowns if they were in Africa or Brazil. It is an unsettling poverty that is suggestive of both the Depression-era black South and problems that are normally thought of as urban, like crack, crime, and unemployment. DeShazo is the first AIDS worker to penetrate these counties.

—From *On the Road in Third-World Alabama*, by Jacob Levenson

Some of these rules of good writing I learned outside of the classroom, some I learned during my class work, too, and others still are a conglomeration of every book I've ever read, essay I've critiqued, and comment made for me by an encouraging professor. I could also craft a list called *What I Learned in Graduate School*. But the contents of that list aren't easy to identify, because the things I learned in the MAPW program weren't mere observations gleaned from a single

project. They were kneaded within me, like a piece of clay molded from a team of collaborating artists.

The MAPW program is structured in such a way that a student can take a variety of classes and apply them to either their concentration or support areas. Often, the classes worked to benefit two types of tracks—applied to either the Creative track or Composition/Rhetoric, for example. Although my concentration is Composition/Rhetoric and support Creative, I am interested in all three tracks (including Applied Writing). The MAPW program has allowed me to pursue courses in all three, with such variances as Document Design to Teaching Writing to The Rhetoric of Religion.

The classes—instead of acting independently of each other—worked together to build upon my work. Some of my writing in Creative Nonfiction helped incorporate a deeply personal sense of spiritual self in The Rhetoric of Religion, and the latter course's final project ended up being a memoir-ish meditation on sin's correlation to disease, chronicling my misadventures on a mission trip to Costa Rica and the resulting life-long affliction with Celiac's disease. While the Rhetoric of Religion (taught by Dr. Todd Harper) enabled an understanding of evaluating author, purpose, speech tactics, and authority of historical text, Issues and Research (taught by Dr. Bob Barrier) uncovered best practices in research, interviewing, and gathering and citing material.

Building upon my first semester courses (Creative Nonfiction, The Rhetoric of Religion, and Issues and Research), my second semester at KSU allowed me to explore those skills in a professional setting. Six hours of my coursework was

dedicated to a practical internship at my former place of employment, Land of a Thousand Hills Coffee, a grass roots coffee company that focuses on sustainability and reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda. Combining research, creative nonfiction, and audience-oriented writing, I developed marketing material for the coffee company, wrote for social media (text for the website, blogs, facebook, and twitter), and created the company's business plan. I also enrolled in Teaching Writing in High School and College (taught by Dr. Mary Lou Odom), where I studied theorists and teaching pedagogies. In Dr. Odom's class, I developed a semester long course for Rwandan students to learn English through comic book writing.

Of all my work in graduate school, I was perhaps the most invested in developing the comic book writing course. It was tangible, creative, well researched and supported, and could be executed in Rwanda (which I planned to do until the trip was cancelled). Like a mad scientist, I was obsessed with creating an innovative way for students to learn English and writing. The following semester, I enrolled in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (taught by Dr. David Johnson) to continue my study of theories and pedagogies for teaching English.

To my horror, I discovered that there are *no best practices* when it comes to teaching English as a second language, and even more, theorists vastly disagree over the importance of grammar correction, the emphasis on vocabulary, and assigned reading material. In the end, I learned I identify most with Truscott, that grammar is acquired naturally—through reading and writing exercises—not through outright correction.

The course I was most excited to take, however, was Fiction for Young Adults with Dr. Aaron Levy. Although I joined the class with no plot or characters brewing in my mind, the course's workshops drew out the plots and characters within me, and challenged me to crawl into the head of a teenager. I frequently reference the activity we did in class on the first day of the semester. *We're going to draw a map*, Levy said. *A map of your neighborhood*. He encouraged us to draw our house, the house of our pesky neighbor who played pranks on us, the house of the kid who smelled, the house of the boy or girl you crushed on, the gas station up the street. Then we mapped out events—what and where they happened in our neighborhood. Throughout the semester, we could reference our neighborhood maps for plot and character ideas. Now the map is useful to my fiction and nonfiction stories alike, to help sort through research, to develop a sense of place.

My coursework in the MAPW program has also allowed me take two online classes—Document Design (taught by Dr. Anne Richards) and the class I'm currently finishing, Social Media (taught by Dr. Laura McGrath). Both courses offer tech-savvy skills related to social media, marketing, and the design of text. Social Media seems like a good class to finish my degree since my career goal has shifted from teaching writing to writing for new media.

As graduation approaches in a matter of weeks, I'm thankful my degree is in Professional Writing—it's applicable to the professional world but still allows me to do the thing I love most: write. I am currently sending resumes to professional writing positions all over Atlanta—for an opportunity writing and editing communications at Emory University, writing for communications at SCAD, but

mainly, I want to write for CNN. As I try to hop on a show like Student News, broadcasted by CNN into classrooms all over America, I'm also working on a professional blog, and am starting to co-write with a team of brilliant film artists and musicians on a short-film project called *Killer Martyr*.

As I step out into the working world with my Masters of Arts in Professional Writing, I'm confident that the diversity of courses offered at KSU, coupled with the skills gleaned from my capstone project, have strengthened me creatively, have given me the ability to apply my education to a professional setting, and will allow me to evaluate writing rhetorically and effectively.

IV. Evaluation

The most difficult aspect of editing *The Oxford American Book of Great Nonfiction Writing* was working with the founding editor, Marc Smirnoff. My previous work with the magazine lent insight to their often pushed deadlines and frantic last minute blitz to finish a project. In our negotiations for the lead editor role, I mentioned my concern over their ability to follow through with deadlines and the pressing graduation date that hinged on the completion of my Capstone. "My one stipulation," I said, "is that you adhere to a reasonable production schedule so I can meet my graduation deadlines." We had a deal.

The project commenced in September 2009 when I made a trip to Arkansas for meetings. I brought back seventy photocopied articles, and within three weeks, I had completed reading, grading, and commenting on batch one. I developed a production schedule and budget, and requested the second batch of articles to be

mailed as soon as possible. Week after week, Smirnoff was “too busy.” Undoubtedly, he was busy, and my patient yet motivational communication didn’t pull through until the week of Christmas when I finally received a second batch of articles in the mail. One month had been lost in the meantime, pushing our production schedule back one month.

Over the next month, I finished my work on all 200 articles, made a second trip to Arkansas in attempts to move the project forward (he cancelled our meetings everyday until the last day of my visit), proposed a page number and article limit, drafted an author contract and introductory letter, and offered my selections for the top 35 articles to be anthologized in the book. One month after our adjusted deadline (renegotiated twice at this point), Smirnoff still had not solidified one article for the anthology, and hadn’t even finished reading them.

His constant excuses claimed he would finish his part, “after this weekend,” then “next week,” and finally, “tomorrow.” But his promises proved empty and by the last week of February, he still had not completed his tasks.

If my opinion for the selection of articles was the only one that mattered, I wouldn’t have to wait on his final decision, but since the article selection needed to be approved by Smirnoff, again I sat frustrated and idle, pleading with him to respect my pressing graduation deadline. Eventually, I decided that in order to complete my Capstone, I must take matters into my own hands and move forward without *The Oxford American’s* guidance. Since all of the guidelines were previously established, I’ve completed the project on my own and upon my graduation from the

MAPW program, will turn over my work to *The OA* for them to review and tweak in-house before seeking publication.

I don't think distance played a very big role in keeping deadlines from being met. Although it is surely easier to stay out of mind with a nine-hour road trip separating us, we maintained frequent communication via phone and email, and had multiple face-to-face meetings. The main issue that kept the project from panning out as planned is a matter of different timetables: Me with a rapidly approaching Capstone deadline in April, and *The OA* with no pressing timeframe.

I wish our professional relationship had worked out in such a way that I could continue my position as Lead Editor instead of merely contributing to *The Oxford American Book of Great Nonfiction*, but for the purposes of graduating and beginning a new career, I proceeded with the project (and completed it!) on my own, but adhered to the guidelines and goals outlined with *The OA*.

And now, the book...

The Oxford American Book of Great Nonfiction Writing

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10 February 2010

Dear **NAME**,

Greetings. We are putting together another book, to be called The Oxford American Book of Great Creative Nonfiction and want your essay, **TITLE**, to be a part of it.

Details (some quirky) are attached in the proposed contract.

I'm cc'ing the Lead Editor on this project, Jessica "Poco" Allgaier. (She can be reached at 404.509.1062 or jessica.allgaier@gmail.com).

We want to make a special book, one that appeals to many inclinations and ages. We will promote it heartily when it comes out and then hope for the best.

Hope you can be a part of this.

Sincerely,

--

Marc Smirnoff
editor

THE OXFORD AMERICAN
201 Donaghey Avenue, Main 107
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New e-address: SMIRNOFF@OxfordAmerican.org

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www.OxfordAmerican.org

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The Oxford American Book of Great Nonfiction
201 Donaghey Avenue, Main 107
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501.450.3497

2 February 2010

Dear **NAME**,

The Oxford American requests permission to reprint the following material by you in a book we are tentatively calling *The Oxford American Book of Great Creative Nonfiction* featuring a multitude of nonfiction first published in the magazine.

TITLE by **NAME** from OA **Issue #**

To retain full creative control over this project, we are compiling and designing the manuscript in-house before presenting it to publishers for possible purchase. Should the manuscript be picked up a publisher, we request nonexclusive, English-language, world-publishing rights of the material listed above.

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Your piece will appear in the first print run and any subsequent editions (including paperback editions) of *The Oxford American Book of Great Creative Nonfiction* (a mouthful but, hey, it is what it is) for a single, one-time fee, the amount of which has not yet been determined and will be contingent upon the terms of any acceptance of the manuscript by a publisher.

We are guessing that a print run would be anywhere from 1,000 to 5,000 copies. We have no idea what money might be offered us. That is one way in which this good-faith project is speculative. We hope, nonetheless, you take the bait and decide to part of the book. The very least we'll accept for payment per contributor is \$250. We'll shoot for at least \$500. (Or you may choose to donate your fee, or a portion thereof, to The Oxford American Literary Project, Inc., a 501-C.

Being a cash-strapped non-profit, The OA would hope to make some money from the book. Maybe at least half of whatever is offered, in total, to contributors? In any case, once details are known we will share the terms of the contract (and the contract itself) with all contributors to the book.

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Conway, AR 72035-5001
www.oxfordamericanmag.org
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Please provide all of the following:

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I, **NAME**, hereby grant permission to The Oxford American to use my essay **TITLE** in *The Oxford American Book of Great Creative Nonfiction*, and extend these rights to the publishing company upon their acceptance of the manuscript.

Signature _____

Date_____

Please provide a credit line and or bio:

Additional permission notes:

Production Budget: THE OXFORD AMERICAN BOOK OF GREAT NONFICTION

Author Payment 35 Articles @ \$500/article

\$17,500

Template Design In house

\$0

Cover Art & Inside Art

\$2,000

Introduction

\$500

Blurbs

\$0

Fed Ex Manuscripts

\$50

TOTAL

20,050